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ABSTRACT

Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in Los Angeles on the status of the community college liberal arts curriculum found that liberal arts programs have a beneficial impact on students. Research findings have consistently revealed that what students know is related to what they study and how they have studied it. Usually, students' self-ratings of their skills in a particular area of the liberal arts are a good indicator of their knowledge in that area. Analyses of course enrollments, class schedules, and curricular changes reveal that most of the enrollment in liberal arts courses is at the introductory level. Reasons students have for enrolling in a particular course vary greatly from fulfilling a general education requirement, to personal enrichment, to fulfilling a requirement for a major. Only a small percentage of students cite counselor or faculty encouragement, student recommendations, or interesting course descriptions as the most important reason for enrolling in a particular course. Suggestions for improving the liberal arts programs include: (1) providing students with more information about courses and their potential benefits; (2) college educators working with their high school counterparts to increase student interest; (3) college liberal arts courses promoting basic skills for underprepared students; and (4) making efforts to decrease liberal arts course attrition rates. (MAB)

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Fact Sheet

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Liberal Arts at The Community College

What is the status of the community college liberal arts curriculum? What reasons do community college students give for enrolling or not enrolling in liberal arts courses? What steps can educators take to increase student participation in liberal arts? Recent research conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (Los Angeles) has focused on these and other problems related to the liberal arts (here defined as courses related to the social sciences, humanities, the biological and physical sciences, and mathematics). This research has included:

(1) An analysis of class schedules and course enrollments at six large urban community college districts in California, Texas, Illinois, Missouri, Arizona, and Florida. (Course Enrollments and Completions...,1983).

(2) Two national surveys conducted to identify changes that have occurred in community college liberal arts programs from 1977 to 1982. (Friedlander, and others, 1983).

(3) Surveys completed by community college students in Washington State, at the Los Angeles Community College District, and at Clark County Community College District in Nevada. (Friedlander, 1981, 1982a, 1982b).

(4) An assessment of student knowledge of the liberal arts based on results of a test (the General Academic Assessment) administered to a cross section of 1,276 students at five community college districts. (The Community College Student Survey...,1983).

Major research findings are summarized below.

What is the Relationship Between Courses Taken and Student's Knowledge?

Community college liberal arts programs have a beneficial impact on students. Research findings consistently reveal that what students know is related to what they study and how they have studied it.

For example, the greater the number of college courses completed in the humanities, the higher the scores on the humanities section of an assessment of general knowledge.

Further, student ratings of their academic competencies were related the kind of courses they completed in college. Students who completed courses in the humanities were much more likely to rate their academic skills as good or excellent in most competency areas considered.

In most instances, the rise in the number of college units completed was accompanied by an increase in the percentage who reported that they made considerable progress in achieving important objectives of general education.

In fact, it has been found that enrollment in business or occupational courses does not contribute as much to student attainment of general educational outcomes as does participation in courses in the humanities, sciences, or social sciences.

What is The Status of Liberal Arts Curriculum?

The analyses of course enrollments, class schedules, and curricular changes reveal that most of the enrollment in liberal arts courses is at the introductory level. Fifteen percent of the enrollment in the humanities, composition, and mathematics were in courses for which there were prerequisites. The social sciences had twenty-one percent of its enrollments at the upper level and thirty percent of the enrollment in the sciences were in courses for which there were prerequisites.

At the same time, pre-college courses in the humanities or social sciences were rarely seen. There were just a few courses in the sciences specifically designed for students who needed some assistance with their reading, writing, mathematics, science, and/or study skills.

It was found that high course attrition rates, especially in the introductory classes, operate to shrink the pool of students available to enroll in second-level courses. To illustrate, course attrition rates in the humanities, mathematics, sciences, and social sciences were each in excess of thirty percent.

Nonetheless, just over one-half of total course enrollment in six large community college districts was in liberal arts classes. The range was from a high of eleven percent of total district enrollments in the humanities and in the sciences, mathematics, and composition, to a low of five percent in the fine arts.

From 1977 to 1982, the number of humanities courses required for graduation was increased in sixteen percent of the colleges studied and decreased in only three percent of the colleges. The number of humanities courses required for graduation did not change in the remaining eighty-one percent of the institutions studied.

In general, the types of humanities courses added to the curriculum focused on a specific topic (e.g., women in politics, medieval ethics, history of labor in the U.S., literature of the Irish, music in American life).

By 1982, interdisciplinary courses were being offered in fifty-one percent of the community colleges. Nearly six in ten of the interdisciplinary courses were team taught. Over sixty percent of the interdisciplinary courses included a literature component. History was included in nearly half of the interdisciplinary offerings. Art history/appreciation, music history/appreciation, and philosophy were incorporated in over thirty percent of the multidiscipline courses.

Between 1977 and 1982, the number of arts and humanities activities offered by community service divisions increased at fifty-three percent of the community colleges, decreased at thirteen percent of the

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colleges, and remained the same at the remaining thirty-four percent of the institutions studied. The average rate of increase in the number of arts and humanities activities offered was nineteen percent; the average decrease in the types of offerings was five percent.

One in three of the regular humanities faculty were involved in planning or presenting arts or humanities events offered through community service divisions. In twenty percent of the nation's community colleges, the faculty in an academic department were charged with approving all academic-related non-credit courses.

Why Do Students Enroll In Liberal Arts Courses?

In the student surveys, respondents were asked to identify the primary reasons they had for enrolling or not enrolling in a liberal arts course. Findings reveal that:

There is much variation in the reasons students have for enrolling in a particular course. For example, within the humanities, one in three enroll to fulfill a general education or distribution requirement, one in four do so for personal enrichment, and one in five participate because it is required for their major.

Only a small percentage of students cite counselor or faculty encouragement, student recommendations, or interesting course descriptions as the most important reason they have for enrolling in a particular course.

The most frequently cited reason students give for not taking a liberal arts course is that it is not required. ``Not interested in the course'' is the second most common reason for not participating in liberal arts courses. ``Too much required reading'' is cited by about ten percent of the students as the main reason they have for not enrolling in courses in literature, humanities, history, philosophy, social sciences, and sciences. Very few students cite ``too much required writing'' as the major reason they have for not enrolling in a particular liberal arts course.

About twice as many students attending college to prepare for a career as those preparing to transfer indicated that ``not being required for the major'' was the primary reason they had for not participating in courses in the liberal arts. Likewise, about seventy percent in each group noted that they did not participate in art, music, theater, or foreign language courses because the courses were not required.

Academically underprepared students differed from those who are better prepared in that they were less likely to enroll in liberal arts classes. They also reported making less progress towards the attainment of important objectives of a traditional liberal arts education. Students who rated their academic skills as fair or poor were much more likely to say they did not participate in course in which that ability was required because they were ``not interested in the subject.'' Such data, however, suggests that students tend to avoid classes in which they think they will not do well.

How Do Liberal Arts Students Rate Their Academic Skills?

Other survey questions asked students to rate their knowledge of the liberal arts and their ability in skills that are requisite to successful performance in the liberal arts. Findings reveal that:

Students self-ratings of their skills in a particular area of the liberal arts (e.g., humanities) was a good indicator of their knowledge in that area. For example, students who rated their skills in science as ``good'' or ``excellent'' scored significantly higher on a measure of knowledge in science than did those who rated their skills in science as ``fair'' or ``poor''. Students in the State of Washington felt most confident in their ability to read, write, and speak effectively, appreciate music, and critically examine ideas. They were least confident in their ability to appreciate art and drama, understand different cultures, and speak in a language other than English.

Areas in which students felt they had made the most progress in college were learning on their own, acquiring background for further education in a professional field, becoming aware of different points of view, and understanding one's self. Areas in which more than one in three students reported little or no progress included writing effectively, speaking effectively, understanding social issues, understanding the social implications of scientific developments, and developing an understanding and enjoyment of art, music and drama.

The consensus among students and their instructors in one large urban community college district was that a high percentage of students has some difficulty in performing activities that require reading, writing, computing, independent inquiry, and a commitment of time to complete course assignments.

To What Extent Do Liberal Arts Students Use Academic Support Services?

Given the significant number of liberal arts outcomes students who could benefit from remedial or developmental assistance, the survey's sought to determine the extent to which academic support services are actually utilized by the students. Findings reveal that:

More than one in five students felt that they could have benefited from having faculty advice regarding transfer, career choice, and study skills. The students indicated, however, that they lacked the time to seek out such advice. Similar results were found with respect to seeking advice in these areas from counselors.

Over twenty percent of the students thought that they could benefit from, but had no time for, tutorial assistance in reading, writing, mathematics, or study skills. The number of students who thought they could benefit from a particular support service, but who had no time for it, was much greater than the number who took advantage of the service.

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Of those students who did not feel confident in a skill, less than thirty percent took advantage of a support program designed to assist them in that skill.

Over fourty percent of the students who were deficient in a basic skill and who did not seek assistance from the college support programs reported that they did not have time to use the service, or that the service was offered at an inconvenient time.

Students attending college to gain skills necessary to enter a specific occupation had much lower scores on an assessment of general knowledge than did those attending college to satisfy a personal interest, prepare for transfer, or to gain skills necessary to advance in a current occupation.

In general, the differences in the kind of courses taken by students preparing for transfer and those preparing for careers were reflected in the amount of progress each group felt it had made in various achievement areas.

What Steps Can be Taken to Increase Enrollments In the Liberal Arts?

Liberal arts enrollments are faring well. However, they still might be improved. Some of the steps that can be taken to increase community college enrollments are listed below.

Since most students are not likely to enroll in liberal arts courses unless they believe that such courses will help them achieve their educational objectives, students should be provided with information on how the liberal arts beneficially impact personal, educational and career development.

Community college educators should work cooperatively with their counterparts in high schools to help increase student interest in and appreciation of the liberal arts.

In order to assist the large number of underprepared students, educators should include reading, writing, and study skills instruction in college-level liberal arts courses.

Efforts should be undertaken to decrease attrition rates in the liberal arts. If the student has a positive experience in his/her first liberal arts course, he or she will be more likely to enroll in another liberal arts course.

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